

# Toxic time bomb decays off coast

**HUNDREDS** of tonnes of chemical weapons are decaying in the sea off Victoria's south coast.

More than 1200 tonnes of shells containing mustard gas were dumped west of King Island after World War II and green groups fear they could poison sea life.

Greenpeace spokesman Matt Ruchel has called on the Federal Government to examine the shells to assess the risk.

"They're toxic time bombs on the ocean floor," Mr Ruchel said.

"We need to know what is going on. There needs to be an inspection and it should be done as soon as possible.

"We also need to know what else was chucked over the side; if there was mustard gas, there may have been other nasties."

The weapons were stored during

## NICK PAPPS

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World War II at Geelong and were part of Australia's chemical weapon stockpile, under the control of American General Douglas MacArthur.

A new Defence Department report, *Chemical Warfare Agent Sea Dumping off Australia*, reveals the United States military and the Australian airforce and army each controlled mustard gas stockpiles in Australia.

The weapons were on stand-by for use on the Japanese who had already used gas in the war.

The Allies were prepared to launch a gas attack if their troops came under fire from Japanese chemical agents.

But the weapons were never used and several tonnes of the shells containing mustard gas were

loaded on to a navy vessel at Williamstown in late 1948 and dumped about 100kms west of King Island.

Other Australian dumping grounds include an area about 40kms off Cape Moreton in Queensland and 33kms south-east of South Head in Sydney.

About 13,000 tonnes of chemical weapons were dumped off the coast of Australia at the end of the war.

The Defence Department report recommends the dumped weapons be left untouched with the gas expected to react with sea water to form hydrochloric acid.

It says there is minimal risk to sea life and humans, but the dumps in Queensland and New South Wales could pose a threat to any plans for sea mining in the area.